

TOWARDS CURTAILING THE MENACE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE OF RAPE IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA: RE-INVENTING TRADITIONAL FAMILY SYSTEM OF THE IGBO GROUP AS THE PANACEA

Chinwe Christiana IYANDA

Department of Sociology/Psychology

Godfery Okoye University, Ugwuomu Nike, Enugu, Nigeria

Email: ciyanda@gouni.edu.ng

Abstract

The rise in incidences of sexual violence like rape in Nigeria has become a very worrisome phenomenon, particularly the sexual abuse and exploitation of minors, under-aged girls and women. The victims of rape encounter severe trauma (especially with culture of silence associated with rape) and other challenges, even as the socio-economic development of the Nigerian society at large is also adversely affected in various ways due to recurrence of rape cases. This paper examines how traditional family system of the Igbo group could be harnessed to advantage in curtailing the spate of rape in Southeast region of Nigeria. Anchored on social control theory of Hirschi (1968), which sees crime and deviance as products of social institutions losing control over individuals, the paper contended that the character of the family of rearing is a major factor that determines whether an individual could perpetrate rape or expose self to risk situations where he or she could be raped. In particular, the paper canvassed the position that the traditional family system of the Igbo group is uniquely structured to curtail rape via training and re-training it provides members. It was emphasized that even extended family members and the community at large partake in child training and socialization processes and all serve as watchdog against deviance. Accordingly, this paper recommended the re-birth of the traditional family system and family unions even in urban settings. It also recommended the upholding of family decisions by courts to enable the family system remain relevant in imbibing appropriate morals and curtailing rape, particularly in southeast in Nigeria.

Keywords: sexual violence, rape, traditional family system, Igbo group, panacea

Introduction

The commitment towards sexual regulation, restrictive social norms, and overall safety in the Southeast zone and other parts of the Nigerian society seems to be waning down. This has resulted in steady increase in number of cases of sexual violence (particularly rape), and other forms of gender-based violence, particularly since the COVID-19 lockdown era. World Health Organization (2014) defined sexual violence as use of ‘coercion’ or forces to achieve sexual relationship. However, there are cultural differences with

respect to what is labeled as ‘forced’ sexual intercourse. On his part, Solhjell (2009) argued that sexual violence is a generic term for coercive sexual abuses, including rape, mutilation of genital which affects reproductive capacity, and forced prostitution. Unfortunately, many women still experience diverse forms of sexual violence during their lifetime in Southeast Nigeria.

The World Health Organization (2014) has articulated ways in which sexual violence affect women as follows

- i. It results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women (including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life)
- ii. It constrains the enjoyment of women’s rights everywhere.
- iii. It is a tool used to maintain existing gender inequalities, violence against women is a manifestation of power and control of men over women
- iv. It disrupts the health, survival, safety and freedom of women and their families
- v. It affects full empowerment of women; (this underscores why efforts to end violence against women and girls, must ensure their empowerment, promote and protect their rights, including access to justice and support services, as well as bring an end to the discrimination women face in all aspects of their lives).
- vi. It has generated trauma, sense of horror and fear in victims

Many factors have been blamed for the occurrence of acts of rape (forced sex) in Southeast Nigeria. These include failed social institutions like the family system in discharging their assigned roles, systemic inequality between the genders orchestrated by patriarchy, indecent dressing and the ease of access to pornographic materials among others.

The character of the family can play far reaching roles in generating incidences of rape in society. At the same time, no meaningful results may be achieved toward the control of rape without the family being at the forefront. The importance of the family institution in stemming the rising cases of moral decadence, erosion of socio-cultural values and permissiveness, manifesting in recurrence of sexual violence and rape in Southeast Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, the fact that both perpetrators and victims of rape come from the family; and that even the scene (site) of rape incidences often take place in family settings(homes) justify the need for rape intervention strategies that fully involve the family system at every stage of its implementation.

Since homes are intended to nurture the psychological and emotional development of its members, the family institution (and by extension marriage) exists not only for procreation but also to regulate the sexual behavior of members in line with laid down principles and norms guiding human sexual

relations in each society. The family also plays a significant role in socializing individuals in the society by inculcating in them values and appropriate behaviours which will be relevant to curtailment of rape.

It is against the above background that this paper focused on how to curtail the menace of sexual violence of rape in southeast Nigeria by re-inventing the traditional family system of the Igbo group which in the context of this paper is considered as the panacea for achieving a rape-free society in southeast zone of Nigeria.

The Family as Constituent Causal Factor for Perpetration of Rape and for becoming a Victim of Rape

A family is not just a group of people. It consists of some unique social relationship which distinguishes it from other types of social groupings. Scholars vary in the way they conceive and define the family. While some focus primarily on a set of social activities or universal functions that distinguish the family from other social institutions, others stressed its structural form or the mode of social organization that characterize it. Both perspectives however offer acceptable definitions to the concept of "family" despite emphasis on contrasting aspects of family life. There are also scholars who combine the structural and functional approaches in order to illuminate all the peculiarities of this important social institution.

Irrespective of the manner in which family may be defined, its characteristics and ability or otherwise, to discharge its social roles has several implications for the social behavior of family members. Concerns over the character of the family are now a topical issue especially as its bonding and regulatory controls on individuals are being eroded by multiplicity of factors. Such factors include industrialization, wage employment of parents, displacement of traditional family systems, effects of new information, communication and technology (ICT) age, role of the media, globalization among others.

There are several factors that are implicated in being either a perpetrator or a victim of rape across societies. Most of such causal factors are related first and foremost to the quality of rearing obtained from the family background which gives rise to the attitude and behavior manifested by the perpetrator and the victim on one hand; as well as the prevailing character of other social structures that make rape possible (Ani, Taiwo, and Isiugo-Abanihe 2019).

The factors that are contributory to rape occurrence in society are discussed by scholars under two broad groups as follows:

- a. Factors that increase the risk of one being raped (like keeping late nights, indecent dressing, excessive alcohol consumption etc)

- b. Factors that increase the risk of an individual perpetrating the crime of rape upon other persons within the social environment (like peer pressure and exposure to modernizing influences such as sex centric novels, magazines, newspaper articles, music videos, advertisement, pictures, social media and online pornography etc). Unfortunately, access to social media does not guarantee concurrent access to sexual partners due to factors like age, social norms of society, vocation or other reasons thus giving room for abnormal sexual behaviours/responses

The relevance of the family background or home training in reducing risk behaviors towards becoming a victim or perpetrator of rape cannot be over emphasized. The traditional family system of the Igbo group with its social control landmarks is particularly suitable to restrain individuals from rape related tendencies hence this attempt to document and reenact those family practices

Theoretical Thrust

This paper is anchored on social control theory of Hirschi, (1968) which sees crime and deviance as results of social institutions losing control over individuals. Weak institutions such as certain types of families, the breakdown of local communities, and the breakdown of trust in the government and the police are all linked to higher crime rates including rape. Hirschi's (1968) social control theory asserts that ties to family, school and other aspects of society serve to diminish one's propensity for deviant behaviour.

As such, social control theory posits that crime occurs when such bonds are weakened or are not well established. Control theorists argue that without such bonds, crime is an inevitable outcome (Lilly et al., 1995). Thus, criminality is seen as a possibility for all individuals within society, avoided only by those who seek to maintain familial and social bonds. According to Hirschi, these bonds are based on four components namely: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief.

It is against the background of the afore stated postulations of social control theory that the need to re-invent and strengthen the traditional family system of the Igbo group of southeast Nigeria to serve as control institution on rape has become very important.

Overview of Nature of Organization of the Traditional Family System of the Igbo Group of Southeast Nigeria and the Extended Family Assembly - *Izu Umunna*

The Igbo group constitutes one of the three principal ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are found mainly in Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi, Abia and Enugu states

including parts of Delta and Rivers states of Nigeria. According to Ifemesia (1979:15), the Igbo country covers an area of over 15,800 square miles. Nwala (1985:15) posits this area to be roughly circumscribed between 6° and 8 1/2 ° East Longitude and 4 1/2 ° and 7 1/2 ° North Latitude.

The descriptions comprise the forest belt area between the Cross River and Benin West of the Niger, and between the Igala to the North and the Niger Delta city states to the south. The Igbos are bounded and in close neighbourhood with the Tiv, Idoma and Igala in the North, Ijaw in the South, Urhobo, Edo and Isoko in the West, while Ibibio and Yako are at the eastern boundary.

Igbo land is one of the most densely populated areas of West Africa. The major occupations of the traditional Igbo group were agriculture, but they also engaged in other economic activities like fishing, mining, smiting and local crafts. Production was not on a large scale and the family served as the basic unit of production. There is a high spirit of industry reinforced by strong emphasis on achieved status in the Igbo society.

The family is the foremost agent of socialization and social control to which the individual is exposed. It controls the quality and quantity of new members of the society by educating the child on the rules, norms, mores and folkways that govern the society.

In the traditional family system of the Igbo society of Southeast Nigeria, the functions of socialization and social control were jointly executed by the nuclear as well as extended families and the larger neighbourhood. The extended family is a grouping into one functional unit of three or more generations of people linked by marriage, descent or adoption. They share a putative father and cannot inter-marry. Ifemesia (1979:68) defines it as “the smallest unit of political authority which is made up of nuclear families or households, tracing patrilineal descent from a common father”.

According to Orjiekwu (1983:29), the family as an agent of social control in the traditional Igbo group setting uses both methods of ‘training’ and ‘restraining’. Amongst the Igbo group, the training was achieved by educating the child by his parents and the larger society, in the code of manners, conventions, customs, morals and laws of his society. Children and youths were seen as public possessions (*nwa bu ihe oha*) and thus, everybody has a responsibility to contribute to their proper upbringing. The Igbo group operates the philosophy of “*ofu onye adi azu nwa*” which implies that one person or parents alone cannot adequately train, moderate and restrain every family member. All family members (especially children and youths) were trained to shun sexual offences like incest and rape which attract heavy penalties. To achieve conformity,

stories of heroes or of tragedies that befell defaulters were also used to illustrate the essence of good behavior.

The traditional Igbo family system adequately restrains the child, youths and adults by meting out punishment as need arise. In the case of stealing, the child culprit is rubbed with charcoal and paraded round the village with the stolen object hanging down his neck. He was humiliated in the process, especially as his peer group sang derogatory song during the parade.

Furthermore, the extended family assembly (*isu umunna*) sat to decide the action to take in respect of adult offences. Every adult male has the right to contribute to the general deliberations at the assembly. The elders however, reserve the right to take the final decision after private consultations among themselves (*igba izu*).

The range of punishments for various adult offenses (depending on their severity) include gossips, apportionment of applicable blames, mandate to undergo a process of ritual cleansing, payment of fines, banishment from the land and or being ostracized from social activities and relationships. The deviant member is customarily bound to comply with whatever punishment or face stiffer measures. In Igbo communities, a person who falls out of line with his extended family is likened to being a bastard. For this reason, individuals carefully avoid violating the norms of their family group and strictly control their sexual urge and overall social behavior

Processes for Re-Inventing Traditional Family System of the Igbo Group as the Panacea for Curtailment of Incidences of Rape

Dissociation of Family System from Tendencies toward Culture of Silence often Associated with Rape Victims There is a prevailing culture of silence surrounding rape in Nigeria (Achunike & Kitause 2014). Many rape cases do not reach medical or legal sectors as many female victims prefer to conceal rape assaults to avoid social stigma, shame and public embarrassment. Often times, even parents of victims do not want to publicly report such cases but rather opt to protect the public image of their daughters. Sometimes, the interest of the victim's family tilts more to maintaining existing cordial social relationship with the perpetrator's family, than fight for the rights of the victim. (Achunike & Kitause 2014). The curtailment of rape will not be possible if perpetrators are not arraigned before competent law courts and accordingly punished. To this end, families must be positively disposed to taking measures that will bring perpetrators of rape to book, rather than shield them through inclinations to culture of silence.

Re-birth of Family Unions even in Urban Areas Family unions; community or kin-group meetings especially in urban centers are strong pillars of support to members in times of economic crisis. They are also crucial in social control

of members' as well as form a strong link between them and the socio-economic growth of their rural communities. The awareness of members of such unions, including the fact that others are watching them, and that they will be sanctioned for wrong conduct could debar people from perpetrating rape even in their urban residencies. Thus the concept of family and its functions has supra-territorial dimensions among the Igbo group of southeast Nigeria.

Upholding Decisions and Sanctions Imposed by the Family in Matters of Rape and Related Issues by Courts

The important role of the family in controlling the incidence of rape will lose its potency if regular courts do not give applicable support to the family system. Such courts could uphold decisions of the family relevant to matters before them. That way, the family institution will be strengthened to do more in her efforts to curtail rape in the Nigerian society.

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